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FABRICS FOR SPRING SEWING

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A radio interview between Mrs. Josephine Junkin Doggett, Director of Research and Club Service, and Miss Ruth O'Brien, of the Bureau of Home Economics, of the Department of Agriculture, broadcast on Tuesday, April 14, 1936, at 4:45 P.M., over the Red Network and supplementary stations of the National Broadcasting Company.

ANNOUNCER:

Consumer Time is here again. Today we're to hear a timely discussion of fabrics for spring sewing. Mrs. Josephine Junkin Doggett, Director of Research and Club Service of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, will ask the questions in the minds right now of all consumers who are planning summer wardrobes for their families. Miss Ruth O'Brien will give the answers. She is Chief of the Division of Textiles and Clothing of the Bureau of Home Economics, of the Department of Agriculture.

Well, ladies, this title automatically excludes masculine comment, so the microphone is yours.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Thank you, Mr. Triggs.

Now, Miss O'Brien, I don't want to discourage you before you start, but it seems to me this is a hard nut we've given you to crack. From my experience, it looks each year as though the business of making a selection of fabrics is more difficult and bewildering -- whether it's in ready-made clothes or in yard goods for home dressmaking.

MISS O'BRIEN:

We start out in complete agreement, Mrs. Doggett. I admit that the great variety of new materials we must choose from these days does present new problems. But that is the price of progress. In your turn you must admit that fabrics are more attractive and more interesting every year.

MRS. DOGGETT:

I certainly hope you can give us some suggestions for the prospective fabric consumer.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Well, this may surprise you, but, first, I would suggest that milady shopper sit down at home and do some thinking - "cerebration" is the word one of my college professors used. And I would have her think out exactly what qualities she wants in that fabric she expects to buy. You know we can really never hope to find material satisfactory to us unless we know what we want.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Perhaps you could give us a sort of questionnaire to help us do our thinking.

(over)

MISS O'BRIEN:

Well, let's see. I believe the first question on my questionnaire would be "what do I want to use this material for?" Is it for a child's play suit which will have hard wear, constant scrubbing and exposure to sunlight? Or is it meant for a few grown-up-wearings on party occasions?

If it's to be used for the play suit, then I want qualities such as durability and shall we say "washability". I want a material that will not shrink and will not fade. So when I get to the store, I will look for labels or ask the clerk about these particular qualities in the fabrics offered me. Of course, I would also look for something pretty and suitable in color and design for the child who is to wear it. But on the other hand, I would be fortified against one of those buys that are made on impulse -- just because the color is nice or the design what some folks describe as "cute". Those usually turn out to be the bad buys. Isn't that your experience?

MRS. DOGGETT:

Yes, it is. But then the next step must be to find fabrics with those qualities, and that is not always so easy. Of course, if you've decided on one of the standbys like gingham, or chambray, or dotted Swiss, you know you're getting cotton, but even then you can't tell by looking at it whether or not it will shrink or fade.

MISS O'BRIEN:

No, you can not. You have to depend on a label or on information the clerk can give you. Personally, I prefer a label because I know the clerk has no opportunity to test out every fabric she is selling. Or, as far as color fastness is concerned, I often take samples home and wash them to see whether or not they are fast to laundering.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Yes, I sometimes do that too, but I have noticed more labels about color fastness than almost any other quality. Of course, some are rather vague and say just "washable" or something like that. I like the ones that say "vat dye" because I know that means the dyestuff which has been used is one of the best.

But how about shrinkage? There are not many labels that give facts concerning shrinkage.

MISS O'BRIEN:

No, there aren't so many. That is unfortunate because, of course, as you said a moment ago, you can't tell how much a fabric will shrink merely by looking at it. And even some of the labels that do mention this, are not very clear. They may say "pre-shrunk" which, taken at its face value so to speak, merely means that the fabric has gone through some kind of a shrinkage process. It may shrink some more. I like to see labels that tell me exactly whether or not I am to expect it to shrink some more and, if so how much more?

MRS. DOGGETT:

Oh, I saw some labels like that the other day. One said "guaranteed not to shrink more than 2%". Another said "Will not shrink when ironed damp". But often labels just give fancy names that don't say anything. I can't even tell from these what fiber the material is made of.

MISS O'BRIEN:

That's the big modern puzzle. And we really should know what fibers we are buying. That is one of the ways we know the qualities we are getting, and how we should care for the material. For instance, we know that the synthetics and silks must be washed more carefully than the linens and cottons.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Yes. I've heard of new dresses of these synthetics literally melting away at the touch of the first pressing iron that came their way.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Well, that was no doubt because the fabric was a cellulose acetate and the iron used was too hot for that material. Most of these fabrics are beautiful and very satisfactory, but they must be ironed carefully. Many of them now carry labels warning that they must be ironed carefully. Many of them now carry labels warning that they must be ironed at a lower temperature than most fabrics. That is the kind of information that belongs on the label and I'm glad to say that it is showing up there more and more these days.

And that reminds me -- I believe no woman must make an effort to know something about the new fibers and new finishes as they appear on the market or we will soon find we can't even understand the language used in talking about textiles.

MRS. DOGGETT:

And that means it would be very easy to mislead us. For instance, the other day I saw an advertisement describing the 'twelve points of superiority' of a batch of silk slips. Number 9 was 'made of luxurious pure silk crepe esprit -- weighted for longer wear'.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Ho ho! Weighted for longer wear. That is a good one!

Well, you will find misleading statements even on labels. But I think women learn these simple technical facts very quickly. I don't think a consumer would find it hard to understand that weighting of metallic salts in silk to make it feel heavy is often responsible for splitting and cracking and wearing out from pressing.

MRS. DOGGETT:

That reminds me of another advertisement I saw the other day of something made of pigskin -- and in parenthesis 'washable and simulated'.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, I've often had that word 'simulated' handed out to me with a flourish to indicate that the 'simulated' material had a special kind of mysterious superiority instead of being merely an imitation of what it looked like.

MRS. DOGGETT:

But getting back to this matter of silk. The other day I heard a clerk talk about an acetate silk. I didn't know there was such a thing.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Well, it happens that there is not. That is a case where the clerk was mixed up too. Suppose we make a little outline of the kinds of fibers we are likely to find now in dress goods. First, there are the cottons and the linens and the wools. These are easy. Then the silks. These may be labeled just 'silk' or 'pure dye silk' or 'weighted silk' or 'unweighted silk'. The last three terms refer to the metallic and other weighting materials which may be added to a silk to give it body without using so much silk fiber.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Isn't there a Federal Trade Commission ruling about those terms?

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, under a Trade Practice Agreement sponsored by the Federal Trade Commission, no silk containing more than 10 percent (---in the case of black, 15 percent) of any substance other than silk can be labeled 'pure dye'. And if the word silk is used in describing such material it must be labeled 'weighted silk'.

MRS. DOGGETT:

So 'unweighted silk' means what it says; 'pure dye silk' means it may have no more than 10 percent weighting, or 15 percent in the case of blacks. But if the label says 'weighted silk' the sky is the limit.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, that summarizes it but in all these cases the fiber is the one made by the little silk worm. Nowadays, of course, many of our fibers are made by human beings. They are the 'synthetics'. It may be hard to believe, but in 1935 more than 250 million pounds of synthetic fiber were manufactured in the United States alone.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Well, that looks as though synthetics would be bound to figure in our choice this spring on any counter.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, more than ever before. And I think it is a good thing. Formerly in the lower price ranges we have had many silks so heavily weighted that they soon split. Synthetics will no doubt take the place of these and give much more service for the money.

MRS. DOGGETT:

And aren't these synthetics called rayons and artificial silks too?

MISS O'BRIEN:

Well, not exactly. Most of them are known as rayons. They used to be called artificial silks but those words are out of style now. On the other hand, some of our synthetics are made of a substance the chemists call 'cellulose acetate'. These are not spoken of as rayons. They are often

called 'acetates' for short. Some firms have coined trade names for the cellulose acetate fiber they make. Most of these names sound something like "acetate" or contain a syllable of that word.

MRS. DOGGETT:

But the other day I heard of a new one. It was 'staple rayon'.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, that is one of the very latest developments of this fine up-and-coming rayon industry. Staple rayon, sometimes called 'spun rayon' has not been on the market very long. It is made by cutting up the rayon filaments into short pieces and spinning them into a yarn. This makes it possible to give new effects to the fabrics. In some cases these fabrics look and feel somewhat like wool so they are spoken of as "artificial wools" but I think wool still has some qualities very much its own that have not been duplicated by this newcomer. But I don't believe many of us would mistake any of these synthetic fibers for wool unless they were mixed in very thoroughly with wool fibers and spun into one yarn.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Are these fibers often mixed with each other?

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, indeed. In fact I was just looking through a book of new spring fabrics this morning and I saw all kinds of mixtures in that one small book. Some were rayons and acetates mixed together; spun rayon mixed with acetates; spun rayon mixed with wool; silk mixed with rayon; cotton mixed with rayon, etc. Here is where I look for a label telling what percentage of each is present. That is a good thing to look for when you are buying any mixed fabric. Because, of course, it is the fiber that predominates that will dictate how the fabric must be cared for and how much should be paid for it.

MRS. DOGGETT:

But doesn't the weave have a great deal to do with the durability of a fabric? How would you go about choosing the right kind of weave?

MISS O'BRIEN:

If you're looking for wear, you're more likely to find it in the good firm weave of well-twisted yarn. Loose yarns whether as a part of figures or stripes tend to snag and pull out. Lacy stripes and figures of course are always the weakest places in a fabric. If you buy that kind of material, you must expect it to break there first. Here again it is a matter of deciding what is wanted. If you are willing and can afford to sacrifice durability for appearance or for the interest of an unusual construction, well and good. But you can't eat your cake and have it too.

MRS. DOGGETT:

And another thing, Miss O'Brien. Haven't you bought fabrics and made them into dresses only to find that they soon pulled out at the seams -- in places where there was strain such as across the back of the shoulders or even in the skirt seams?

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, slippage of yarns is certainly something to think about. It has become such a problem that the textile testing laboratories have developed tests for this property. I hope fabrics will soon be labeled with some facts about it, but we can judge it to some extent ourselves at the counter before we can buy the material. If the weave does not seem firm, pull it between your hands and see if the yarns slip out of place easily.

MRS. DOGGETT:

Then there is this thing of dots and figures that pull out or wear off. I have learned to be a bit wary of them.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Yes, it's always well to remember that dots and figures applied on fabrics are more of what might be called a 'speculative investment' than those made by weaving in different colored yarns. But these designs can vary a good deal. Some are printed on. This is a matter of dyeing and again the fastness of the dyestuffs used is the important thing. If a small white figure or dot is on a dark background it is likely to be what is called a 'discharge print' because the color of the background has been bleached out or 'discharged' to make this white figure. Such fabrics often give away first in these white places because the chemicals used in discharging the color were too strong or not properly washed out after the process.

MRS. DOGGETT:

One of my friends had a dotted dress once that simply lost its dots. They didn't wear out, they just wore off.

MISS O'BRIEN:

Oh yes. Those were probably paste dots -- metallic or paste figures which stand up on the surface of the fabric. You might say these spots are easy to spot.

MRS. DOGGETT:

I see our time is about up. Thank you, Miss O'Brien, I feel more courage now to tackle this business of buying yard goods.

ANNOUNCER:

And thank you both, Mrs. Doggett and Miss O'Brien, in the name of all potential home dressmaking consumers.

You have just been listening to Mrs. Josephine Junkin Doggett, Director of Research and Club Service of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and Miss Ruth O'Brien, Chief of the Division of Textiles and Clothing of the Bureau of Home Economics in the Department of Agriculture.

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Each Tuesday at this time we bring you a consumer conversation through the cooperation of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Broadcasting Company.